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Workshop at the Swiss Conference of Migration and Mobility Studies

Tuesday, 7 July 2026

Migration Stories: Imagination and the Power of Representation

Lorenzo Piccoli, European University Institute

11:45 – 13:15 CET

This workshop will be held in person at the University of Neuchâtel, [Avenue du 1er-Mars 26](#), Room C56. It has a limited capacity of 25 participants, who will be accepted on a first served basis by way of the [conference registration form](#). **Participation is restricted to registered participants of the Swiss Conference of Migration and Mobility Studies (SCMMS).**

Description

Do the stories societies tell about human movement have any political impact? This workshop builds on a systematic study of 410 films, documentaries, and television series on migration (1940–2024) to interrogate the relationship between artistic representations and political processes. The research identifies a persistent "North-bound bias" in cinematic output and a growing spectacularisation of irregular and forced migration. It suggests that it is important to pay attention to the kind of stories societies tell about migration and human mobility because these stories may have important effects on how these phenomena are governed. The workshop builds on this research agenda and invites participants to ask whether migration stories have tangible consequences for public opinion, governance processes, and electoral discourses. A widely discussed case is the novel *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins, which depicts a Mexican mother and son fleeing cartel violence and attempting to reach the United States. Upon its release in 2020, the book became a bestseller and was selected for Oprah Winfrey's influential book club. However, it also triggered intense public controversy: critics argued that the novel reproduced stereotypes, commodified migrant suffering, and privileged an outsider's perspective over those of migrants themselves. Through interactive activities, participants will consider the political impacts of different media, including films, literary fiction, autobiography, and arts in general, with the shared goal to trace the political afterlives of migration stories. Working together, participants will develop an original research agenda at the intersection of arts, knowledge production, and politics.

Before the Workshop

Participants are asked to share through this [link](#) a text of maximum 300 words describing one migration story they have in mind. This can be a film, a novel, a memoir, a short story, a news report, or any text or artefact in which migration is represented in a way you find artistic and significant, troubling, or illuminating. The text should briefly propose ways in which the story had a political impact. The text does not have to be formal. Instead, participants are invited to propose personal reflections. Participants will not be asked to present formally, but these reflections will constitute the starting point for the workshop. **The text should be shared by the 30th of June at latest.** Sharing a text is a mandatory pre-requisite to participate to this workshop.

Bio

Lorenzo Piccoli is Assistant Professor at the Migration Policy Centre and School of Transnational Governance of the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. His research examines political contestation over migrants' rights and access to protection mechanisms, including social protection, with a particular focus on Southern Europe. He has published widely in international peer-reviewed journals and regularly contributes to international media discussions on migration and citizenship. He is currently writing a book on the dilemmas faced by volunteers providing social services to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Mediterranean countries. Lorenzo Piccoli holds a PhD in Social and Political Sciences from the European University Institute (2018). Previously, he was the Scientific Coordinator of the Swiss National Center of Competence in Research for Migration and Mobility Studies (2019–2021) and Research Associate at the Global Citizenship Observatory (2018–2021).